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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 005182

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: CABINET SHUFFLE EXPECTED

REF: A. BANGKOK 5077 (CABINET RESIGNATION)  
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2424 (PAD LEADER OPPOSES DECEMBER  
ELECTION)  
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 2327 (PRASONG ON SURAYUD/SONTHI RIFT)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Further resignations will force Prime Minister Surayud to make changes in his cabinet. The new line-up should be announced within a few days. Retiring Army commander GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin is widely expected to be named Deputy Prime Minister in charge of security affairs, but there appears to be significant opposition to him taking the Interior Ministry position just vacated. The exodus of cabinet members will make it difficult for Surayud to reassign duties among the existing ministers, which was his announced preference. Embassy contacts are perplexed by this sudden political turmoil. Some point to GEN Sonthi or the military as provoking resignations to free up the important Interior Minister slot for Sonthi. Others blame a cabal of hard-line anti-Thaksin activists, eager to delay the elections by sowing chaos in the government, and to discredit a prime minister they see as too soft on Thaksin. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) PM Surayud Chulanont returned from the UNGA to face a cabinet crisis, as four more cabinet members were hit with accusations that they held shareholdings in public companies above the prescribed limit (ref A). Surayud called a cabinet meeting for Monday to discuss a ministerial reshuffle. By late afternoon, two of the accused Cabinet members -- Natural Resources and Environment Minister Kasem and Deputy Foreign Minister Saowanit -- had resigned. This follows the resignations last week of the ICT Minister Sittichai, Commerce Deputy Minister Oranuj and Interior Minister Aree, following statements by the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCC) about their excessive shareholdings. (In the case of the Interior Minister, he is also in trouble for holding shares in a company that did business with the government. This restriction is in the act establishing the NCCC, not just in the abrogated Constitution; Aree may face criminal proceedings in this case). Press sources say three more cabinet members may also have excessive share-holdings or related ethics issues: Education Minister Wichit, Public Health Minister Mongkol and Deputy Finance Minister Phasee.

[1](#)3. (SBU) A wide variety of sources have confirmed the press reports that GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin will be made Deputy Prime Minister, in charge of security issues. This has been

under discussion for months, and is not likely to cause much reaction, if the reports are true. Although he has stepped down as Army Chief, GEN Sonthi remains head of the Council for National Security, which has a mandate to oversee security issues. The DPM appointment would not appear to give him any additional powers. The more difficult question is who will take the Interior Minister portfolio. Following speculation that GEN Sonthi might take this position as well, PM Surayud suggested that he himself might take the job, or that a deputy minister might move up into the position. Surayud also responded to a wave of rumors that swept through the capital over the weekend, and denied that he would resign. He has told the press that he would prefer to rearrange the responsibilities of the current ministers rather than try to bring in new members to the government at this late date. However, at the rate he's losing cabinet members, this may be difficult.

14. (C) Most of our contacts admit to being perplexed by this sudden crisis. Several of the accused ministers have complained that they declared all their assets when they took the job, and no one told them they were supposed to put their excess shares in a blind trust, as laid out in the (abrogated) 1997 Constitution. Some still speculate that the goal of breaking the story now is to pave the way for GEN Sonthi to take over the Interior Ministry. They consider that elements of the military may be behind the sudden move by the NCCC. Others point to a cabal including anti-Thaksin rabblouser Sondhi Limthongkul and coup conspirator Prasong Soonsiri, both of whom have been virulent critics of the current government (ref B and C). The goal would be to discredit Surayud, and force a delay in the elections by sowing enough chaos in the government that it would be unable

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to meet the tight deadline presented by a December 23 election date. We note that Sondhi Limthongkul told us earlier this year that he was strongly opposed to an election this year, and the growth of the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party has probably only increased his concerns (ref B). Prasong has also indicated support for delaying the elections.

COMMENT  
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15. (C) Announcements of the cabinet shuffle are expected within the next day or two; it will be difficult to assess the full extent of the damage until we see the new line-up. Whatever the exact genesis of the crisis, it appears that the faultlines we have seen throughout the past year remain, with a hard-core anti-Thaksin element trying to push the more moderate government to take a tougher position. PM Surayud remains committed to holding elections this year, and so far he has stuck to his position. We will continue to emphasize the importance of Thailand keeping to the timetable for the return to elected government.  
BOYCE